

Merriken is Delaware's 2017 "Tree Farmer of the Year"



Leslie Merriken surveys the woods on her 440-acre California Tree Farm west of Harrington. *Photo by Dorothy C. Abbott – University of Delaware Cooperative Extension*

Honored for work in conservation and education

Leslie Merriken received Delaware's 2017 "Tree Farmer of the Year" award for her extensive work in forestry conservation and education at the [Delaware Forestry Association](#) annual meeting in Bridgeville. The honor recognizes landowners who practice exceptional management and promote sustainable forestry. The [American Tree Farm System](#) was established in

1941 and is one of the oldest forest landowner organizations. Delaware's first Tree Farm was certified in 1959; today there are more than 200 Tree Farms covering over 20,000 acres.

For the past 30 years, Merriken has been a forceful advocate for forest stewardship planning and multiple resource management embodied by the Tree Farm model: "Wood, Water, Recreation, Wildlife." She owns and manages more than 1,000 acres in Delaware that have been in the Merriken family for generations and are recognized by the [Delaware Century Farm](#) program: the historic 600-acre Fairplay Farm near Greenwood and the 440-acre California Farm west of Harrington, which dates to 1752.

Merriken grew up on a dairy farm but got involved in forestry through her late husband Cal, whose family began farming in the First State after arriving from England in the 1680s. She attended her first Tree Farm meeting in 1988, began serving on the State Forest Stewardship Committee in 1999, and joined Delaware's Tree Farm Committee in 2000.

Her active approach to forest management was recently featured in the [September 2016 edition of USDA's "Profiles in Conservation,"](#) where she related her passion for natural resources, forestry, and wildlife:

"The forestry part, with long-range goals, is for timber income, wildlife, and my own personal satisfaction," she said. "There's nothing better after a stressful day than to come out to these farms and just sit there. I find it very peaceful."

This past year, she completed a successful 245-acre thinning that accounted for the presence of bald eagle nests. She partnered with the [Delaware Forest Service](#) to begin work on a 300-acre timber stand improvement project. In addition, she received funding from [NRCS](#) to improve oak species on a 23-acre tract to enhance wildlife habitat.



Rep. David L. Wilson (R-35) and Rep. William R. “Bobby” Outten (R-30) were on hand to honor Leslie Merriken as Delaware’s 2017 “Tree Farmer of the Year.”



Leslie Merriken, Delaware's 2017 Tree Farmer of the Year, at her California Farm just west of Harrington. *Photo by Dorothy C. Abbott – University of Delaware Cooperative Extension*



At left, fellow Tree Farmer Bill Jester of Felton was on hand when Leslie Merriken hosted a tour of her 600-acre Fairplay Farm property in September, 2010.

A strong supporter of education, Leslie has hosted tours at her Delaware Tree Farms and attended a variety of local, regional, and national Tree Farm meetings, among them: the 50th Anniversary Tree Farm meeting at Cape Henlopen in 1991; the first annual National Tree Farmer Convention in Williamsburg, VA; and national conventions in Ogunquit, Maine and Savannah, GA.

She regularly shares her firsthand experience with other landowners and forestry professionals, such as a recent talk on the benefits of quality deer management and diversion food plots at the 2017 Delaware Ag. Week sessions in Harrington. She encourages landowners to practice whitetail deer management through the [Quality Deer Management Association](#) because it has helped her to diversify income on her Tree Farms while also promoting healthy population levels for deer herds.

Merriken's pioneering work on deer diversion food plots was featured in a [Feb. 2015 article of "American Agriculturalist,"](#) which outlined how she helped develop an innovative solution to minimize deer browse damage to the cash crops near her woods. She had found that 13 years of participating in [Delaware's Severe Deer Damage Assistance Program](#) had not fully addressed the issue.

"We saw no substantial reduction of deer browse on our crops," recalled Leslie Merriken. "We reached a point where additional deer harvesting wasn't effective."

So she worked with farmer Richard Carlisle of Bridgeville and wildlife expert Latty Hoch to plant diversionary food crop plots along the most heavily browsed areas of the farm. Non-

irrigated, odd shaped areas lying adjacent to the farm's pine plantations with poor soils were chosen. Fifty-foot-wide strips of clover and alfalfa were planted between the cropland and the pine plantations.

When the improvement in yield was measured against the amortized costs of planting along with the reduction in acreage, the project was nevertheless deemed a success. In the first year, an 80% reduction of corn browse damage was observed.

Merriken's outstanding dedication to forestry has earned her this accolade before: in 2007, she shared the Tree Farmer of the Year award with her husband Cal, who passed away in 2008. Calvert Merriken himself first won the award back in 1978.